

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: INISHTRAHULL SPA

SITE CODE: 004100

Inishtrahull SPA is situated approximately 12.5 km north-east of Malin Head, Co, Donegal and comprises the whole of the island of Inishtrahull and a group of islands, the Tor Rocks, which lie approximately 2 km north-north-west of Inishtrahull, and the intervening sea. The Tor Rocks, the most northerly point of land in Ireland, comprise six rocky pinnacles rising to approximately 20 m above the High Water Mark, with about eight sub-tidal rocks clustered about them. The island of Inishtrahull (34 ha) rises to 43 m at its western end and extends west-east for some 1.5 km. The geology of the site is of Lewisian gneiss, considered to be the oldest rock in Ireland, and having affinities with the rocks of southern Greenland and some of the Hebridean Islands. The soils found on Inishtrahull are either thin glacial tills or peaty podzols. Inishtrahull was inhabited up to the early part of the last century.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Shag, Barnacle Goose and Common Gull.

For most of its length the coastline of Inishtrahull is of cliffs. The cliffs are not particularly high, the highest point of the island being only 43 m at the western end where the cliffs are best developed. The cliffs are mostly not sheer and are indented by deep clefts. The vegetation of the interior of the island of Inishtrahull is predominantly grassland - trees are entirely lacking. Four Red Deer and a large population of rabbits graze the island.

The site supports important populations of a variety of seabird species and the Seabird 2000 survey recorded the following species in 1999: Shag (127 pairs), Fulmar (95 pairs), Common Gull (30 pairs), Lesser Black-backed Gull (35 pairs), Herring Gull (20 pairs), Great Black-backed Gull (40 pairs), Kittiwake (43 pairs) and Black Guillemot (8 pairs). A more recent survey in 2008 recorded Shag (210 pairs), Fulmar (95 pairs), Common Gull (24 pairs), Lesser Black-backed Gull (30 pairs), Herring Gull (40 pairs), Great Black-backed Gull (17 pairs), Kittiwake (33 pairs) and Black Guillemot (67 pairs). The Shag and Common Gull populations are of national importance. The population of Great Black-backed Gull, a resident species, is also of national importance. Higher numbers of several species had been recorded in 1991/92, especially Fulmar (250 pairs), Shag (500 pairs) and Lesser Black-backed Gull (100 pairs). Small numbers of breeding Common Tern and Arctic Tern have been recorded in the past but not in recent years. Storm Petrel was confirmed to be breeding on the island in 2006 (estimated as 100-1,000 pairs).

Several other bird species breed, notably Eider (over 100 pairs in 2008). Eider first colonised Inishtrahull in about 1912 and was the first Irish breeding site for this species, which is found only in the north of the country. Chough (1 pair) and Raven

(1 pair) also breed on the island. Other breeding bird species include Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Turnstone and Ringed Plover, Meadow Pipit, Rock Pipit, Stonechat, Skylark, Swallow and Wheatear. Peregrine and Kestrel regularly hunt for prey on the island. An automated lighthouse on the island attracts large numbers of migrant birds on overcast nights and, because of its strategic position, Inishtrahull is used as a staging area for passage migrants.

Inishtrahull is used for feeding and roosting by Barnacle Goose – surveys undertaken between 1993 and 2003 recorded a four survey mean peak of 56 birds, but up to 1,500 birds have been recorded roosting at this site. The birds are considered part of the population which nowadays mostly frequents Trawbreaga Bay and areas around Malin Head.

Grey Seal, a species that is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, frequents the area and hauls out on Inishtrahull - up to 600 individuals have been recorded from the area during the summer.

The site is of considerable ornithological significance as it is the most northerly seabird colony in the country and supports a good diversity of seabird species including nationally important breeding populations of Shag and Common Gull. The site also supports a nationally important population of wintering Barnacle Goose, a species that is listed on Annex I of the E.U Birds Directive. Inishtrahull also has one of the largest breeding colonies of Eider in the country.